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ABSTRACT

Initially, public education came into being in this country as a direct result of the efforts of parents. However, affluence in the 1950s resulted in less need for parental assistance in the schools. Since the 1950s, the erosion of the relationship between school and home has continued. The publication "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" has given little attention to parental involvement. However, programs and information concerned with parental involvement have been available from the National Parent Teacher Association, the March of Dimes, National Volunteers in the Schools, and the National Coalition for Parents' Involvement in Education. Every educator should reach out to groups interested in parental involvement in education to form coalitions that will benefit the schools. (BJD)

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Carol Kimmel
National Forum on Excellence in Education
December 7, 1983

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

We all know that public education came into being in this country as a direct result of the efforts of parents. Parents built the buildings, kept the teacher, taught the children, and raised the money to meet the needs. Progress brought organization--school boards or councils, laws requiring schools and school attendance. Affluence in the 50's brought less need for parents to be of assistance in the schools--except to see that referenda passed, of course. At the same time more and more mothers were entering the work force. Also, at the same time, educators were saying, "let the educators run the schools--this is our business--we are trained and know what is best in education." Some parents resisted, but it really was easier. The system said, "don't teach your child to read--we just have to undo the mistakes you have made." Home and school drifted apart. Even in the Pursuit of Excellence: Education and the Future of America written by John W. Gardner in the late 1950's, Gardner expressed concern that "excellence cannot be pursued by the schools alone, nor obtained by narrow academic prescriptions. Excellent performance is a blend of talent and motive." In the same report, Galbraith is quoted as saying, "When Americans understand and believe in something--they support it. People approve most of what they best understand."

But the erosion between school and home continued and increased. You know the reasons we give--working mothers, single parents, mobile society, movement of children from neighborhood schools, television, teenage pregnancies, and on and on. Administrators and teachers say parents don't care, don't help, and expect the school to assume the responsibility for all the things that school and home and community used to share. Parents say that administrators and teachers don't care, won't listen, and really don't want them in the schools. I'm sure there is enough blame to go around and we have worn out all those excuses on both sides. However, I am very concerned that in the Nation at Risk Report there is so little attention given to the role of parents in improving the education of the students. I spoke to one of the members of the commission about this and he said that they had given a great deal of thought to this, but since time was limited, they felt that they couldn't really address the issue. I can understand this. As I glanced quickly through the literature I had in my own files, I found publication after publication advocating increased involvement of parents in education. From Families and Schools, published by ECS in 1979, references such as, "No matter how well conceived, well financed, and well intended, an education that cannot counteract the profound cultural effects of the home will not achieve its goals," or "it is surprising that while educators have recognized that the school cannot motivate children in the face of parental indifference, they have not called for a comprehensive national program of parent education and involvement."

So, what can we do better together than we have been doing separately? There are many groups working with parents and trying to expand their efforts. Let me mention just a few.

The National PTA has for 86 years addressed the very questions we have been asked to address today. They have excellent programs and information for parents on Children and Television, Drugs and Alcohol - A Family Affair,

Parent Seminars on Adolescent Sexuality. By the way, that is not a new program with the PTA. In 1898 the PTA adopted a resolution that all children should have sex education before puberty. Some things take a while to accomplish. They publish a wonderful workbook for parents, Looking In On Your Schools. Every issue of PTA Today, the monthly publication, deals with current local, state, and national issues in which parents should be involved.

The March of Dimes works with schools and parents in a wide range of issues dealing with teenage pregnancies, drugs and alcohol, good health habits, the relationship of parents and their children in discussing these problems, and also in reading programs involving the children and parents.

National Volunteers in the Schools are very active in many areas of the country and involve many parents and community people in the schools.

The National Coalition for Parents Involvement in Education is a fledgling coalition of national organizations seeking to find ways to involve parents in the education of their children.

There is no doubt as to the general agreement that parents must assume responsibility and support of the schools in the areas of discipline, motivation and expectations, school attendance, sex education, and drug education, as well as supervision of TV and attention to homework. At the same time, I believe that most parents want a good education for their children and want their children to do well in school. The unknown seems to be how to reach across this chasm that has developed between the home and the school. Unfortunately, with the heavy load that the schools are already carrying, I think the school system must assume the leadership of bridging this chasm. It isn't easy and won't come quickly. However, we see some evidence of progress being made, especially in areas where financial difficulties are making it necessary for parents and community groups to join together to provide for the programs that can no longer be funded through the usual federal, state, and local funding. Never has there been a more opportune time for educators to go to parents and say, "we can't do it alone--if we are to have excellence in education, you must help." Parents must once again feel needed. Even if a parent comes only to stir chili at the school frolic--this is a contact that gives some feeling of being a part of the school. Probably the most important person in this struggle of reaching the parents is the school principal. If the principal wants parents in the school, wants to include them in assuming some of the responsibility of the child's education, it can be done--difficult as it is. In the 1979 publication of ECS one superintendent said, "In time, virtually all parents can be reached in some way, and it is important to remember that effective parent involvement will not come easily. When parents find that they are welcomed, wanted, and needed, they will participate." It behooves every educator to reach out to each and every group interested in parental involvement in education and form any coalition that will benefit the schools in that community. I believe words of 1958 still apply, "when Americans understand and believe in something--they support it." Will lengthening the school day or the school year really make the difference if the parents don't understand the goals and help provide a home environment that will better prepare their children to benefit from the additional effort made by the school?